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## How Do We Talk in University Classrooms about Gender Violence Against Mothers?

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### Unsettling Emotion and Negotiating Care in a Feminist Matricentric Pedagogy and Praxis

*The inclusion of mothers and students' experiences of gender violence offers new hope for breaking the silence in the university classroom and beyond. As students bring their experiences of gender violence to the university classrooms, teaching/learning practices are increasingly complexified. How do educators engage students on the emotionally- charged subject of gender violence in motherhood and non-motherhood classes and courses? Do student self-disclosures of gender abuse and domestic violence in the classroom negatively impact students' well-being? This paper examines gendered notions of emotion and care in pedagogies to argue that a feminist matricentric pedagogy and praxis can open up emotional and dialogic spaces in the classroom when teaching and learning about gender violence in motherhood courses and classes. Here a feminist matricentric pedagogy places the gender violence experiences of mothers and students at the center of feminist pedagogies and in teaching/ learning spaces. A praxis of "negotiating care" located within gendered class dynamics and unequal power relations takes account of the potential for student trauma and conflict while offering transformative possibilities of student resistance, maternal empowerment and collective activism.*

How do we as teachers engage with students in university classrooms on the difficult, stigmatizing and often emotionally-charged subject of gender violence against mothers? Is students' well-being compromised by class discussions of gender violence in courses and classes on motherhood? As more and more students bring their experiences of gender violence to the university classrooms, teaching/learning practices are increasingly complexified. My interest in this topic originates from my own Ph.D. research that examines gender violence, mother abuse and state policy on maternal/child welfare. Both my teaching

and research are informed by my activist work over fifteen years in the violence against women sector. In the development of my own teaching praxis for courses and classes on motherhood, I am concerned about the pedagogical context of emotion expressed by students and student self-disclosures of gender violence in university classrooms and the implications for teaching/learning. My experiences as a tutorial assistant and course instructor teaching about the issues of gender violence against women and mothers have led me to question the extent to which we can really talk, teach and learn about these important gender and motherhood issues in university classrooms without addressing the emotional dimension.

This paper examines gendered notions of emotion and care in pedagogies to argue that a feminist matricentric pedagogy and praxis open up emotional, discursive, and dialogic spaces for transformative teaching and learning about gender violence in motherhood courses and classes. I first provide the background context for my experience as a tutorial assistant teaching about gender violence in classrooms where students share their experiences. In the second section, the historical context of feminist pedagogies sheds light on the problematics associated with the gendered binaries of reason/emotion and masculine/feminine in mainstream pedagogies. Here I propose a feminist matricentric pedagogy that embeds mothers' and students' experiences of gender violence within feminist pedagogies that challenge gendered, essentialist and maternal notions of care and emotion in the classroom. In the last section, I advance a transformative teaching praxis of negotiating care within the (un)safe classroom to attend to student conflicts, emotional dissonance and trauma.

### **Student/Teacher Experiences in a Tutorial on Gender Violence: The Background Context**

In my second year as a Ph.D. student teaching a university class about gender violence, emotional outpourings and tears accompanied students' personal disclosures of gender violence. Four years of university teaching had not prepared me for the classroom experience where students share their experiences of abuse with such emotional expression. In the social science course, we covered broad themes of gender and women's inequalities, feminisms and social change. Later in the curriculum, the course has a two-week component on violence against women and the "teaching/learning moments" that occurred primarily in the first week also shaped the student engagement and work over the next several weeks.

In this class, twenty-four of the twenty-five students were women, predominantly racialized and of varying ages. While only a few students identified as mothers, many students shared their experiences as adult children of mothers

who experienced gender violence. On this day, I introduced the topic of violence against women, expressing how it is often a difficult topic for students. Without hesitation, students shared their experiences of gender violence. Their self-disclosures ranged from personal experiences as mothers with abusive and threatening male partners, adult children no longer living in the home where their mothers are in abusive relationships, and adult children who lived in families where fathers abused their mothers. Other students shared their personal stories of friends and family members in abusive heterosexual and lesbian relationships. Each story seemed to trigger another story. Several women cried telling their stories, while other students spoke no words, and wept quietly. After class, some students approached me individually to share their personal stories of gender violence. At the end of this two-hour tutorial, I was fatigued and emotionally spent. Were students traumatized by this experience, I wondered? Do educators avoid these emotionally-charged topics of social (in)justice and gender (in)equality for fear of upsetting students?

As more motherhood courses and classes are offered at universities and more mother students enter the universities, attention to the experiences of mother students in academia is important. Recent U.S. feminist scholarship considers the importance of mother student experiences in feminist teaching and learning for cultivating and supporting student activism (Byrd). Addressing the lack of Canadian research on mother students, researchers are critical of teaching institutions and pedagogies that assume the traditional student is a young single student without children and family responsibilities (Ajandi; Pemrenke). Jennifer Ajandi's doctoral research highlights the important inclusion of mother students in the classroom and mother-specific topics such as gender violence against mothers. Profiling Aboriginal single mother students, Marlene Pemrenke's research examines the financial, cultural and care giving challenges these non-traditional students encounter in their university studies.

Canadian statistics bear out that the lives of mothers and women are increasingly circumscribed by gender violence in their families and intimate relationships. 40% of women assaulted by their male partners said their children witnessed the abuse and in many cases, the violence was so severe that women feared for their lives (Statistics Canada 13). The first assault by a male partner against a female partner often occurs when a woman is first pregnant. 1 in 3 women are sexually assaulted in their lives, with young women, age 15 and younger, experiencing the highest rates of violence (Statistics Canada 14; SASSL Pamphlet, citing Population Reports: Ending Violence Against Women). Given these statistics, educators can no longer teach as if violence against mothers is only happening "out there." What pedagogical theories then inform the teaching/learning of the emotionally-charged topic of gender violence against mothers in university classrooms?

## Theorizing Emotion and Care: A Feminist Matricentric Pedagogy and Gender Violence

Feminist critiques of mainstream pedagogies flag the inherent masculinist bias of reason in teaching/learning and the devaluing of emotion as “specifically feminine” in traditional pedagogies. Mainstream pedagogies draw primarily from cognitive psychology, social psychology, and neurosciences where emphasis is placed on cognition as the way to achieve rational knowledge in teaching/learning environments (Bloom; Anderson and Krathwohl; Bransford et al.). While important thinkers like Benjamin Bloom have long acknowledged the intertwined nature of the cognitive and affective domain in knowledge production, more recent pedagogy scholars have neglected to do so. For example, scholarly research that builds on Bloom’s taxonomy either excludes any mention of the affective/emotional domain in learning (Bransford) or ignores the problematics posed with separating out the cognitive and emotional domains (Anderson et al.).

Emotion in pedagogy is under-theorized in part due to the Enlightenment legacy that valued male knowledge as objective, rational and value-neutral. Female knowledge in turn was seen as subjective and unable to achieve the same degree of pure objectivity and rationality as male knowledge (Code 1993, 1981; Ettlinger). Challenging the androcentric bias in mainstream scientific pedagogies, earlier feminist research locates pedagogies of women and mothers’ subjectivities within the “personal is political” politics of second-wave feminism. Critical of individualist ideology of mainstream pedagogies that failed to produce a moral and compassionate citizen (Noddings), pedagogies of care were based on a feminine subjectivity in women’s caring friendships (Porter) and maternal relations of educational development (Woollett and Phoenix; Noddings). For example, to educate decent, loved and loving persons, research advocated a ‘relational ethic of caring’ based on natural caring, identifying the mother-child relationship as a prototype for the relational dyad of caring in teacher/student relationships (Noddings 174). Teachers created a safe classroom by employing a teaching praxis based on maternal care, relationship, attachment and empathy in teacher/student relations (Noddings; Berman).

Given the historical gendering of the man of reason and woman as emotion in traditional knowledge production, more recent pedagogy scholars are critical of the essentializing assertions of women/teachers as innately caring and nurturing that sustain teaching/learning models of care and emotion as uniquely feminine and outside the realms of masculine reason (Boler 2004; Weiler). Additionally, the discourse of empathy in pedagogy with its origins in moral and cognitive development models often casts empathy as specifically feminine, emphasizing

rather than challenging gender differences (Weiler). Here again, emotion in pedagogy was often pathologized as a private and individual problem, rather than seen as a sign that the outside world has a problem (Boler).

Many of these earlier 'women's pedagogies of care' failed to attend to the universalisms of so-called objective pedagogies, masking race, class, and gender differences (Porter; Woollett and Phoenix; Noddings). Critical pedagogies premised on Paolo Freire's liberatory pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire) sought to address these shortcomings. Drawing on Freire's Marxist politics of conscientization, empowerment and people's capacity to feel, feminist pedagogies critically examined the interlocking oppressions and privileges of race, class, gender and sexuality (Berlak; Weiler; hooks).

More recent "third wave" feminist pedagogies advance pedagogies at the intersection of feminisms of social justice, mother student activism, and feminist mothering and teaching (Green; Byrd). These feminist pedagogies seek to offer transformative visions of social justice inside and outside the classroom to address maternal oppressions and inequalities across different races, classes, ages, and sexualities. Eschewing a biological basis for teaching in a 'motherly fashion', Deborah Byrd advances a service-learning pedagogy that engages single mother students inside and outside the classroom as mother activists challenging the myths and stereotypes of bad welfare mothers perpetuated by the oppressive welfare state (Byrd 137, 145). While Fiona Green acknowledges the risks of playing into the essentialist stereotypes of women teachers as naturally feminine, caring and maternal, she argues for all teachers regardless of gender or parenting identities to include love and compassion in the pedagogical dynamic (Green 206).

Building on these feminist and maternal pedagogies, I advance a feminist matricentric pedagogy that locates mothers' and mother students' experiences of gender violence at the center of feminist pedagogies potentially opening up transformative dialogic spaces of resistance and empowerment inside and outside the classroom. Disrupting the essentializing notions of women teachers/students as naturally and innately maternal, emotional and caring, a feminist matricentric pedagogy includes a cognitive-emotional platform in teaching/learning that acknowledges the role of emotion in producing so-called rational knowledge in teaching/learning for all students. This is key as emotion is often the portal through which student voices can break the silence about gender violence. Placing women's experiences as mothers at the center of classroom discussions then opens up discursive spaces for challenging the myths and stigmatizing stereotypes of good/bad mothering and deserving/undeserving mothers that shape oppressive dominant discourses of mother blame and risky and irresponsible motherhood.

Attention to diverse mothers' experiences of gender violence across, race, class,

sexuality and nation sheds new light on the complexities and contradictions of gender violence. Here, Ajandi notes how women wanting to be “good mothers” inspired some women to stay in abusive relationships, while prompting others to leave (citing Strega and Hilton 103). When considering racialized gender violence in immigrant communities, immigrant mothers are more likely to stay in abusive relationships when culturally-sensitive supports are unavailable (Agnew). Additionally, women’s fears of deportation and the potential loss of their children as a result of abusive partners who threaten to report them to immigration authorities influences immigrant mothers’ decisions to leave or stay. Low-income women who seek safety for their families from gender violence often encounter financial hardships and the stigmatizing shame and blame for the abuse and their material realities within dominant stereotypes of the “undeserving” single welfare mother.

This inclusion of mother student identities and experiences in the classroom opens up the discursive spaces for teaching/learning about gender violence within the larger context of maternal and gender oppressions and compromised maternal/child welfare under neoliberal and colonialist states. For example, the structural gender inequalities and systemic issues of gender violence largely unaddressed under decades of intensifying neoliberalism perpetuate the myth of mother abuse as an individual and private issue often blaming mothers for the abuse and responsabilizing mothers for the safety and protection of their children from family violence. As masculinized wealth and power grows exponentially under corporate neoliberalism widening the gap between the rich and poor, state responsibility to address maternal/child welfare, gendered caring inequalities and the promotion of a caring manhood/fatherhood lags (Kershaw).

With declining state support for maternal/child welfare, the Canadian child welfare increasingly intervenes in families where domestic violence exists, whether women leave or stay in abusive relationships. Here welfare authorities acting in the best interest of children pit the interests of mothers against their children (Greaves et al.). Bureaucratic child welfare institutions support the work of welfare professionals surveilling and monitoring mothers’ daily activities that promulgates bad mothering and risky motherhood (Swift). ‘Failing and neglectful mothers’ risk child loss and separation as state interventions ramp up to protect children through child apprehensions, and the temporary or permanent removal of children from mothers’ care into state custody. Under the colonialist state, euro-centric policies and practices of intervention into Aboriginal mothers’ families continue to support cultural genocide, maternal/child separations and family breakdowns in First Nations communities (Cull).

As students share their diverse experiences of gender violence against mothers

in university classes, concerns are raised for potential student trauma in the speaking, hearing and witnessing of these personal stories. What pedagogical praxis can facilitate mother student voices in the classroom on the topic of gender violence while attending to the care of all students?

### **Unsettling Emotion and Trauma in the (Un)Safe Classroom: Negotiating Care in Pedagogical Praxis**

The issue of student well-being and care is central in teaching, talking and learning about maternal social injustice and gender inequalities in university classrooms. Contemporary feminist scholarship dispels the myth of the safe classroom, acknowledging that a safe teaching/learning space free from emotional dissonance is an impossible and sanitizing task (Boler, 2004, 1999; hooks; Berlak). One anti-oppression educator who uses confrontation to create student trauma argues students better internalize the information (Berlak). Other pedagogy research highlights how differential power relations in the classroom mediate conflicting emotions of anger, guilt, fear and defensiveness that potentially disempower and silence students (Houston; Ellsworth). For example, during class discussions about gender violence, women's emotional self-disclosures of abuse and violation in the presence of men who hold discursive power, subverted the act of consciousness-raising for many women students who were silenced while other women took a problematic care-taker role expressing their concerns for men's feelings (Lewis 177).

How then can educators promote students' well-being and student self-disclosures in teaching/learning spaces where the potential for student conflict, emotional dissonance and trauma exists? The complexities of students' emotional dissonance in the classroom are partially addressed through curriculum design (Donadey). Building curriculums in motherhood classes and courses that include an intersectional analysis of gender violence within maternal oppressions/empowerment and gendered inequalities in care giving, families and societies can highlight social injustices faced by mothers and their children seeking violence-free lives. The introduction of these motherhood and gender issues at the beginning of the syllabus provides educators with a foundation for discussing the emotionally-difficult topic of gender violence later in the course while also anticipating student resistance, tensions and emotional conflict (Donadey). In the curriculum component on gender violence, Gail Murphy-Geiss recommends including student observations in family court as a way to emotionally engage the students with 'real life' domestic violence situations in the court systems outside the classroom. She suggests this further enhances students' learning and engagement with the difficult topic inside the classroom as the experience of abuse is not the students' so emotions, while



palpable are at a bit of a distance (Murphy-Geiss 379, 385).

In the classes I teach, the gender violence component appears later in the course. This is helpful as students have worked together in the classroom over many months and have developed some classroom rapport. During the class discussion on gender violence, I often reference the course articles and theories on the subject, providing a larger context for students' personal experiences of gender violence, while offering some relief and distance from students' self-disclosures. However, as I argue here approaches to teaching/learning about gender violence that avoid student conflicts and emotional fall-out are potentially limited in their transformative possibilities. While caution is given to equating student self-disclosures in classrooms to successful teaching/learning praxes on gender violence, of concern are teaching practices that potentially suppress student voices and experiences of gender violence.

Negotiating student care begins the first day of the course. Drawing on feminist pedagogical praxes, I disrupt the myth of the 'safe learning space' explaining to students that given emotionally-charged topics, class dynamics and students' different and diverse experiences, a classroom safe from conflict and emotional discord is not necessarily possible, nor is it valued. Emphasis is placed on working towards a safe(r) classroom through the building of a safe(r) learning community in the classroom where the confidentiality of student voices and experiences are respected inside and outside the classroom. To support student well-being in the course, I draw students' attention to the course website and syllabus listing student supports for counseling referrals and supports available on and off the university campus. Common for motherhood and non-motherhood courses and classes on gender violence is the inclusion of referrals to crisis lines and women abuse shelters to support students (Murphy-Geiss). After the classes on violence against women and maternal gender violence, a follow-up e-mail with reminders of local woman abuse shelters and crisis lines further supports students.

Less researched are pedagogical praxes to facilitate and manage 'in-class' discussions of gender violence and the experiences of mother and non-mother students bringing and sharing their personal stories of gender violence to the classroom. Here I offer my teaching praxis that has evolved out of multiple teaching experiences on gender violence and maternal gender violence. In proposing 'negotiating care practices', teachers can attend to student well-being and the facilitation of diverse student voices and experiences about gender violence by negotiating with the students to manage the emotional dissonance in the class. For example, as student self-disclosures and emotions surface in the class, I negotiate with students on several occasions throughout the discussions about continuing on the topic or taking breaks. The majority of student nods and a show of hands determine if the class continues on the same path or not.



Removing any attendance and participation penalties for classes where there is a high level of emotional dissonance allows students to come and go quietly in the classroom. This classroom practice also supports students in managing their own exposure to trauma, if any, associated with bearing witness to student self-disclosures of gender violence. While two students in one tutorial approached me at break and asked to leave early, most students generally stay and continue in their tutorials. Depending on the level of emotional engagement in the class, I also manage student well-being by soliciting student feedback at the end of the class about possible revisions for the next class(es) on the topic of gender violence and maternal oppressions.

Motherhood and non-motherhood university courses enriched with student experiences of gender violence can lay the foundation for student empowerment and activism. After an emotionally difficult class on gender violence, students in one tutorial surprised me with their requests to take on extra course work and do a collaborative student project on gender violence. On their own initiative, students brought magazine articles and photos to class creating two posters to raise public awareness about gender violence. The students then displayed these posters in a central location in the university where they could not be easily removed. In my own learning experience as a teacher, I noticed how throughout the student-led group project there was peer cooperation rather than individual resistance that often accompanies graded group work.

Conceptualizing the classroom as a site of negotiating care within gendered power relations and emotional conflict and trauma opens up new and transformative teaching/learning possibilities on the topic of gender violence in motherhood classes and courses. A matricentric perspective located within transformative feminist pedagogies places mothers' diverse experiences of gender violence at the center of teaching and learning providing a safe(r) learning space for mother and non-mother students to speak out as empowered survivors and activists organizing for social change. In sharing our classroom experiences as educators, we can continue to advocate in the university and beyond to break the silence on gender violence against mothers.

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